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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 008777

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S DISAFFECTED YOUTH VOTE: CAN IT BE COOPTED?

(U) Classified by Ambassador W.R. Pearson; reasons: 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: Protest voting is an old tradition in Turkey but showed a new twist in Nov. 3 national elections. Motorola deadbeat and Berlusconi wannabe Cem Uzan -- emphasizing a xenophobic, nihilistic message and playing on resentment of America -- parlayed the anger of disaffected urban youths into a notable percentage of votes for his Genc (Youth) Party. Whether this bloc of protest voters can be coopted by governing AK Party or will remain to be manipulated again at the next elections will depend on the government's ability to address unemployment, sharply lower standards of living, and a deep-rooted mistrust of governing parties. End summary.

2. (C) Turks have long used the ballot box to show their dissatisfaction with endemic corruption and feckless leadership of politicians. In 1999, for example, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) capitalized on an angry electorate to capture 18% of the national vote. Although the concept of the "protest vote" is therefore nothing new in Turkey, the Nov. 3 national election was noteworthy for the strong showing of Cem Uzan's Genc (Youth) Party. Uzan's xenophobic, nihilistic, and often anti-American rhetoric attracted people of all ages, including many from among the nearly 4 million young Turks who voted for the first time. The questions are: 1) whether these poorly educated, unemployed youths searching for a political voice will be coopted by the ruling AK (Justice and Development) Party, itself embodying an anti-Establishment message, as it wrestles with Turkey's pressing economic issues; or 2) whether they remain a floating group that could be manipulated, once again, by Cem Uzan or someone else playing on similar themes.

Who voted for Genc?

3. (C) During the campaign, as Uzan's media-savvy and manipulative campaign gathered force, many observers feared that Uzan would get up to 15% of the vote, well beyond the 10% threshold for representation in Parliament. Uzan's poll numbers tailed off at the close of the campaign and in the end, mainly since AK Party had captured the aspirations of a significant portion of voters in the greater urban sprawls, he could not garner more than 7% of the vote. Nevertheless, his provocative rhetoric -- supported by a massive media campaign on the multiple Uzan-owned TV channels -- played well with certain segments of the Turkish electorate disgusted with the status quo.

4. (C) Local Ankara contacts explained to us recently that Genc appealed to disaffected nationalist youths across the political spectrum. One AK Party official in Ankara's Mamak sub-province claimed that half of Genc's vote total came from those who voted for MHP in the 1999 national election. Besir Atalay -- founder of ANAR polling firm and now a State Minister and close partisan of P.M. Abdullah Gul -- told us Nov. 15 that a significant portion of Genc votes came from former P.M. Bulent Ecevit's Democratic Left Party (DSP) and his coalition partner Motherland Party (ANAP). In addition, a local AK Party boss claimed that Genc had made inroads among stay-at-home women voters because of its intense television ad campaign in the run-up to Nov. 3.

5. (C) There was also a strong anti-American undercurrent to many of Genc's campaign themes. Indeed, many of our contacts across Turkey have noted that Genc supporters were attracted by the fact that Uzan had defrauded Motorola, thus the U.S., of more than \$2 billion: "If he could cheat the U.S. to such an extent, he must be clever enough to run Turkey" is a refrain quoted over and over to us.

6. (C) In left-leaning Izmir, where Genc drew some 18% of votes, both a local political observer and a candidate from center-right DYP have told us the party attracted voters from

all age groups. People who were fed up with years of corruption and with Establishment parties in general, including CHP, or who were fearful of losing their jobs in a deepening of the economic downturn which had already ravaged Izmir, were looking for a way to register their dissatisfaction. In "infidel" Izmir -- so called because of its staunchly secular voting tendencies -- this disaffected group did not choose AK. Genc voters saw the party as the only viable, secular protest party and cared very little about the party platform, according to our contacts in the region.

Can Genc Survive?

17. (C) Based on our discussions with local and national politicians, whether Genc survives as an important factor depends on: 1) the party's resources and ability to create an infrastructure; and 2) the AK government's ability to deal effectively with Turkey's pressing economic problems.

18. (C) Building a party largely from scratch requires more than the deep pockets Uzan could dip into for a brief if intense election campaign (free concerts, food, and even handing out cash). AK's party boss in Ankara's Yenimahalle district explained that Genc has not as yet put into place an effective grassroots machine or invested significantly in its own infrastructure. Genc's future, therefore, will depend in part on how well Uzan can build a credible nation-wide party structure.

19. (C) Genc's prospects also depends greatly on how the AK government performs. The Mayor of Kecioren, a conservative Ankara sub-province, explained that if AK eliminates the underlying conditions -- perceived fecklessness of politicians in general and a failing economy -- that gave rise to Genc, Uzan stands little chance of surviving as a political figure. Otherwise, with Turkey continuing to urbanize and to need job creation at a pace to absorb its overwhelmingly young population, the disaffected youth vote will remain a manipulable and potentially decisive bloc the next time around.

PEARSON